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THE ETHOS OF DACTYLIC AND SPONDAIC VERSES IN HOMER

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Most readers of Homer have noticed the connection between the rapidity of action and the rapidity of the verse that describes the running of a horse which has just broken the halter:

Ζ 511: ῥίμφα ἐ γούνα φέρει μετά τ' ἥθεα καὶ νομόν ἵππων.

The rapid speed of the dactyls seems intentionally to illustrate the speed of the horse. Also the easy sailing of a boat under a fair breeze appears admirably stressed by the pure dactyls of

Λ 11: τῆς δὲ πανημερίης τέταθ' ἰστία ποντοπορούσης.

The swift flight of time might be judged to find an echo in the swift dactyls describing that flight in

α 16: ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ ἔτος ἦλθε περιπλομένων ἐνιαυτῶν.

The winds in answer to the prayers of Achilles came quickly to fan the flames in Patroclus' pyre:

Ψ 214: αἶψα δὲ πόντον ἱκανον ἀήμεναι, ὥρτο δὲ κύμα-.

The speed of the winds seems to correspond with the speed of the dactyls. The suddenness with which the rock slips from the hands of Sisyphus and rushes to the valley below appears to be mirrored in the verse which so wonderfully describes it:

λ 598: αὖτις ἔπειτα πέδονδε κυλίνδετο λᾶας ἀναιδής.

From such verses as these has sprung the belief that in Homer the verse of five dactyls is used especially to describe rapid and unimpeded motion, or in the words of the late Professor Sterrett in his *Iliad*, p. N5, "Verses with five consecutive dactyls are always used with a purpose: namely to depict the rapid movement of an action or mental excitement." This is, of course, an extreme putting of the case. The description of the stone rolling rapidly from a crest or ridge down into the valley below seems exactly suited to the rapid movement of a pure dactylic verse, but Homer also has the reverse of this picture, and he describes the slow and labored movements of sluggish mules as they climb from the valley of the Scamander up to the slopes of Mount Ida in order to draw wood for the fire which is to burn the body of Patroclus, and this verse is dactylic:

Ψ 116: πολλὰ δ' ἄναντα κάταντα πάραντά τε δόχμιά τ' ἦλθον.

The two longest series of pure dactylic verses which I can find do not describe rapid or excited action, but on the contrary the slowest and most solemn rites. The first series is this:

Ψ 135: θριξὶ δὲ πάντα νέκυν καταείνυσαν, ἃς ἐπέβαλλον
κειρόμενοι· ὅπιθεν δὲ κάρη ἔχε δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς
ἀχνύμενος· ἔταρον γὰρ ἀμύμονα πέμπ' Ἀιδόσδε.
οἱ δ' ὅτε χῶρον ἱκανόν, ὅθι σφίσι πέφραδ' Ἀχιλλεύς,
κάτθεσαν, αἶψα δέ οἱ μενοεικέα νήον ὕλην.

These five successive dactylic verses describe the preparation of the body of Patroclus for burning and the movement to the place chosen for the pyre; a funeral march or dirge, yet how little its verse resembles our "Slowly and sadly we laid him down"!

The other longest dactylic series has also five verses:

Ψ 166: πολλὰ δὲ ἴφια μῆλα καὶ εἰλίποδας ἑλικας βοῦς
πρόσθε πυρῆς ἔδερόν τε καὶ ἀμφεπον· ἐκ δ' ἄρα πάντων
δημὸν ἔλων ἐκάλυψε νέκυν μεγάλυμος Ἀχιλλεύς
ἐς πόδας ἐκ κεφαλῆς, περὶ δὲ δρατὰ σώματα νήει.
ἐν δ' ἐτίθει μέλιτος καὶ ἀλείφατος ἀμφιφορῆας,

These verses describe the final preparations just before the kindling of the pyre. The action pictured is superlatively calm and deliberate, as well as slow and solemn. In the like preparations for burning the body of the young Elpenor the tone is essentially dactylic at the point of greatest solemnity:

μ 12: θάπτομεν ἀχνύμενοι θαλερόν κατὰ δάκρυ χέοντες.

Penelope delayed long the completion of the garment she was weaving, finishing it slowly and reluctantly:

β 110: ὧς τὸ μὲν ἐξετέλεσσε καὶ οὐκ ἐθέλουσ', ὑπ' ἀνάγκης.

Her hesitation finds no support in this pure dactylic verse.

When Nausicaa started back for the city she drove with caution and very slowly so that those on foot might keep near:

ζ 320: ἦ δὲ μάλ' ἡνιόχευεν, ὅπως ἄμ' ἐποίαιο πεζοὶ
ἀμφίπολοί τ' Ὀδυσσεύς τε, νόψ δ' ἐπέβαλλεν ἱμάσθλην.

Is it not as fair to suppose that these dactyls picture the steady and deliberate moving of Nausicaa and her mules, as it was in Z 511 to say the dactyls picture the speed of the running horse?

When Polyphemus calmly and grimly tells Odysseus that he will eat him last and that too as a guest gift, the verse is dactylic:

ι 369: Οὐτὶν ἐγὼ πύματον ἔδομαι μετὰ οἷς ἐτάροισιν.

Anticleia, as she tells Odysseus in Hades the bitter story of her broken heart and her longings for her absent son, says:

λ 202: ἀλλὰ με σός τε πόθος σά τε μῆδεα, φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεύ,
σὴ τ' ἀγανοφροσύνη μελιηδέα θυμὸν ἀπηγύρα.

To one accustomed to hear the slow and solemn words

I am thy father's spirit.
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires.

spoken by the ghost of Hamlet's father, these dactylic verses spoken by the shade of Anticleia seem strange indeed.

The tired laborer as he watches the slow setting of the sun grows impatient to return home for his evening meal:

ν 33: ἀσπασίως δ' ἄρα τῷ κατέδν φάος ἡελίου.

This dactylic verse hardly seems to echo the impatience of the tired ploughman.

Similar examples, in which a verse of five dactyls describes the calmest and most solemn movements or actions, might be added indefinitely.

This is the favorite verse for such stock commonplaces as:

τὸν δ' ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη νεφεληγερέτα Ζεὺς.
ὥς ἔφατ', αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ μὴν ἀμειβόμενος προσέειπον.
οἱ δ' ἐπ' ὀνείαθ' ἑτοῖμα προκείμενα χεῖρας ἴαλλον.
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πόσιος καὶ ἐδητύος ἐξ ἔρον ἔντο.
ὃ σφιν ἐν φρονέων ἀγορήσατο καὶ μετέειπεν.

Similar dactylic verses are very numerous.

No other verse in Homer is found so often as the dactylic, of which there are over 5,000 examples, or about one-fifth of the whole number of verses in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

There are a few more verses with four dactyls, but these verses are not identical, since the second spondee is found in different feet in different verses. Homer's favorite verse is *ddddd*, the next in favor is *dsddd*.

The verse with five dactyls is used by Homer to describe every possible action or emotion from the deepest sorrow and calmest grief to the most excited action and the greatest joy. Miss Lucile Cannon, a former student of mine, made the tone or feeling of the dactylic verse in the *Odyssey* the subject of a most careful study and found that in the more than 2,000 pure dactylic verses in the *Odyssey* 350 are sad, slow, or gloomy, 125 lively, rapid, or cheerful, while the rest are formulae or otherwise neutral in tone.

Just as the dactylic verse has often been supposed to denote rapid or excited acts or emotions, so also the spondaic verse has been held to denote slow and impressive thought or action; and to quote again the words of Professor Sterrett in his *Iliad*, "The spondaic verse paints in sound values either slow, deliberate movement of the action, or an action of solemn, awesome

import, or else anxiety of the mind." The extreme spondaic verse is, of course, the rare verse with six spondees:

ο 334: ἐύξεστοι δὲ τράπεζαι
σίτου καὶ κρειῶν ἡδ' οἶνον βεβρίθασιν.

This is the most commonplace description of the luxury and splendor with which the suitors are served and feasted. There can be no idea of awe or solemnity in it.

φ 15: τῷ δ' ἐν Μεσσήνῃ ξυμβλήτην ἀλλήλουιν
οἴκῳ ἐν Ὀρτυλόχοιο δαίφρονος. ἦ τοι Ὀδυσσεύς.

Here we have the account of the meeting of Iphitus and Odysseus in the house of a friend. The remarkable thing about this passage is that the first verse consists only of spondees, the second is purely dactylic, yet they belong to the same description and have exactly the same tone.

χ 175: σειρήν δὲ πλεκτὴν ἐξ αὐτοῦ πειρήναντε

This verse is part of the command of Odysseus in regard to the punishment of the false goat-herd; and the tone of this verse is not different from that of the adjoining verses, yet the preceding verse and the following have four dactyls each.

The spondaic verse in the *Iliad* which seems most clearly to prove the solemn tone of the spondee is Ψ 221, but this verse is only one in a series which describes the mourning of Achilles. The series is:

Ψ 220: οἶνον ἀφυσσόμενος χαμάδις χέε, δεῦε δὲ γαῖαν,
ψυχὴν κικλήσκων Πατροκλῆος δειλοῖο.
ὥς δὲ πατὴρ οὐ παιδὸς ὀδύρεται ὅστέα καίων,
νυμφίου, ὃς τε θανὼν δειλοὺς ἀκάχησε τοκῆας,
ὥς Ἀχιλεὺς ἐτάροιο ὀδύρετο ὅστέα καίων.

Of these five verses one is of pure spondees, two have four dactyls, and two are dactylic throughout, yet the tone is the same in them all. The two other verses in the *Iliad* which have been classed as composed of six spondees, B 544, Λ 130, seem to have at least one dactyl each.

Verses with five spondees are fairly common, there being about one hundred of them in Homer, and it is in this larger number that we must seek for the spondaic ethos.

When Odysseus met Nausicaa and begged for clothing and succor he added the following prayer:

ξ 180: σοὶ δὲ θεοὶ τόσα δοῖεν, ὅσα φρεσὶ σῇσι μενοινᾶς,
ἄνδρα τε καὶ οἶκον, καὶ ὁμοφροσύνην ὁπάσειαν
ἔσθλῃν· οὐ μὲν γὰρ τοῦ γε κρεῖσσον καὶ ἄρειον.

The first of these verses has five dactyls, the last five spondees, yet I can detect no difference in tone.

When the vain curiosity of the companions of Odysseus had frustrated the plans made for their return, and the winds had brought them once more back to the island of Aeolus, and when Odysseus had gone to beg again for a favoring escort, the angry god replies with the cruel spondaic verse:

κ 72: ἔρρ' ἐκ νήσου θᾶσσον, ἐλέγχιστε ζώντων·

Here the spondees seem to echo the stern wrath of the god, but when this same god repeats this same command, just three verses farther on, the verse is purely dactylic:

75: ἔρρε, ἐπεὶ ἄρα θεοῖσιν ἀπεχθόμενος τόδ' ἰκάνεις.

It is impossible to find any change of tone or manner in these verses.

Miss Cannon classifies the 58 verses of the *Odyssey* which have five spondees as follows: 12 are stern or gloomy, 17 lively or cheerful, and the rest are neutral. This number, 58, might be increased or diminished as one increases or diminishes the use of the dieresis.

As a rule just where a spondaic verse seems most impressive it is set between two verses each with five dactyls.

While one would like to think the poet intentionally used a dactylic verse in describing the running of a horse or the rapid rolling of a stone, yet the free use of such verses in dirges or descriptions of funerals, also the interlocking of verses of five spondees with those of five dactyls in picturing the same scene, and the added fact that a verse of five spondees is re-echoed by one with the same number of dactyls, all these prove that Homer was just as willing to picture a lively scene with spondees as with dactyls, and a solemn one with dactyls as freely as with spondees.